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## Research Note: Patterns of Alcohol Consumption in a Northern Irish Sample

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*This paper examines the drinking habits of a Northern Irish sample during a six-month period in 1998. In addition the study examines the influence of contextual variables on the quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption. Questionnaires were administered to 600 participants; the response rate was 39.8% (239). An unexpected low abstinence rate was observed that, however, may be due to response bias. The results revealed high frequency (29.7% drink on four or more days a week) and high quantity of alcohol consumption (mean units per week 43.21, SD 40.33). Beer drinkers consumed the largest quantity of alcohol and also had the highest frequency of alcohol consumption. It was observed that 45.8% of all drinking events took place in a public bar and the popularity of the public bar for alcohol consumption was not influenced by age or gender. The present investigation revealed that almost half (45%) of individuals consume more than one type of beverage at one sitting, and there is a trend of consuming alcohol in more than one place during a single drinking session. These results indicate a distinctive drinking pattern within Northern Ireland and have implications for studies investigating the effects of alcohol on the social drinker.*

**Keywords** binge drinking; alcohol consumption; drinking pattern; abstinence rate; Northern Ireland

### Introduction

Drinking habits in Northern Ireland can be distinguished from drinking habits in the wider European and United Kingdom contexts. In Europe it is common for people to consume small amounts of alcohol frequently. In contrast, Northern Ireland is associated with a more concentrated drinking style. Northern Ireland has long had a large proportion of total abstainers (Blaney and MacKenzie, 1978; Sweeny et al., 1990), with 30% of adults who do not drink at all. However, within its population of drinkers, drinking tends to be less frequent with greater quantities (Blaney and MacKenzie, 1978; Sweeny et al., 1990; Harbison and Haire, 1982). There is also evidence to suggest that the number of women who drink is increasing, and that drinking is heaviest among younger age groups (Harbison and Haire, 1982).

A focus of large-scale research has been placed on the examination of drinking practices in terms of user characteristics. Drinking practices have been found to vary according to age, sex, socio-economic status, income, education, ethnicity, religious affiliation, marital status, and urbanization (Calahan et al., 1969; Casswell, 1980; Dight, 1976). Recently attention has been directed toward the study of influential factors other than the characteristics of individuals. Situational and contextual variables differ according to demographic variables and have been found to be important determinants of alcohol consumption (Clark, 1977; Harford, 1983). It has been observed that in Great Britain, drinking in a home setting is the most popular location for women, while bars are a more common setting for men (Dight, 1976; Wilson, 1980).

The present research aims to investigate the alcohol consumption patterns of a Northern Irish sample. It is predicted that large quantities of alcohol will be consumed during one sitting. The present study also aims to investigate the association between the place of alcohol consumption and the quantity and type of alcohol consumed in terms of user characteristics, gender, age, and occupation.

### Method

Data collection began in May 1998 and was completed October 1998.

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## Participants

Sixty first-year psychology students within the University of Ulster distributed 10 questionnaires outside the college environment. The participants were informed that the study was concerned with the assessment of normal drinking practices within the population. Respondents were not required to give their name but could do so if they were willing to take part in further studies. Of the total number of questionnaires distributed, 239 were returned, 108 (45.2%) from males and 131 (54.8%) from females. Only 36 forms included the individual's name and contact details.

## Materials

The study employed a short self-report questionnaire (after Knight and Longmore, 1994, p.97). Respondents were asked to report their gender, date of birth and occupation. Frequency of drinking, using the previous month as a reference, was assessed using a five-point scale. The five-point scale ranged from consuming alcohol no days in the previous month to six to seven days per week. This information was obtained for each type of beverage: beer, wine, and spirits. Respondents also provided information concerning the amount of each alcoholic beverage consumed at one sitting, this ranged from no pints of beer to eight or more pints, no glasses of wine to 15 or more, and no measures of spirits to 15 or more. The question concerning place of alcohol consumption provided four choices in which alcohol is usually consumed; pub or bar, at home or the home of friends or relatives, a club or disco, or somewhere else. Using the last week as a reference, respondents reported on which day(s) of the week they had consumed alcohol.

## Results

Two hundred thirty nine (39.8%) of the questionnaires were returned. The results reveal that 8% of the respondents were abstainers. Among the alcohol consumers Friday (59%) and Saturday (73.6%) are the most popular days for alcohol consumption. A total of 591 drinking events were reported for the total sample within the previous month. As can be seen from Table 1, 53.63% of all drinking events occur on the weekend.

It was observed that the public bar (68.8% of respondents) is the most popular place for consuming alcohol, accounting for almost half (45.8%) of all drinking events. As can be seen from Table 2, the respondents who drink beer have the highest frequency, 23.4% of the respondents drink beer six to seven times a week, and the highest volume, 31.8% consume >14 units per occasion. It was revealed that almost half the sample mixes their drinks (45%), that is the consumption of beer and spirits on any one occasion (see Table 3). The age distribution of the sample was: 20% of participants under 20 years, 42.3% aged between 20–30, 23% aged between 30–40, 10.9% aged 40–50, and 3.8% aged over 50 years. The mean age of respondents was 30.01 (SD 10.233) with a median age of 28. A median split was employed to look at the effects of age on consumption (28 years and under 125 respondents, over 28 years 114 respondents).

**Table 1**

Number and percentage of respondents who consume alcohol each day of the week

Day	Number (%) of people who drink on each day	% of all drinking events for each day of the week
Monday	46 (19.2)	7.78
Tuesday	62 (25.9)	10.49
Wednesday	36 (15.1)	6.09
Thursday	67 (28.0)	11.36
Friday	141 (59.0)	23.85
Saturday	176 (73.6)	29.78
Sunday	63 (26.4)	10.65

**Table 2** The number (%) of respondents who consume each type of beverage 0–7 days per week and the number (%) of respondents who consume each quantity of each type of beverage per drinking occasion

	Number days each type of beverage was consumed				
	No days N (%)	N (%) 1	N (%) 2–3	N (%) 4–5	N (%) 6–7
Beer	78 (32.6)	21 (8.8)	57 (23.8)	27 (11.3)	56 (23.4)
Wine	153 (64)	40 (16.7)	29 (12.1)	9 (3.8)	8 (3.3)
Spirits	134 (56.1)	21 (8.8)	45 (18.8)	19 (7.9)	19 (7.9)
	Volume of each beverage consumed at one sitting				
	0 N (%)	2 N (%)	4 N (%)	6 N (%)	≥7 N (%)
Beer	81 (33.9)	18 (7.5)	35 (14.6)	29 (12.1)	76 (31.8)
Wine	153 (64)	24 (10)	26 (10.9)	18 (7.5)	14 (5.9)
Spirits	134 (56.1)	19 (7.9)	28 (11.7)	22 (9.2)	36 (15)

**Table 3**

The number and percentage of participants who reported consuming each combination of mixed drinks on any drinking occasion

	N	%
Beer	74	31
Wine	26	10.9
Spirits	21	8.8
Beer and Wine	16	6.7
Beer and Spirits	40	16.7
Wine and Spirits	14	5.9
Beer, Wine and Spirits	29	12.1

Pearson Chi-square statistics were employed to investigate the effect of age on place of alcohol consumption and the younger and older age groups. These analyses revealed that age group was related to the consumption of alcohol in a club or disco [Pearson  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 239) = 35.307,  $p < 0.001$ ] (53.6% of younger, 16.7% of older respondents). No other relationships reached significance. The quantity of each type of beverage was converted into units and independent samples,  $t$ -tests were employed to investigate the effects of age group on the quantity of each type of beverage consumed per drinking occasion. These analyses revealed significantly [ $t$  (237) = 3.55,  $p < 0.01$ ] more spirits consumed per occasion by the younger age group (mean 7.376, SD 9.3115) compared to the older age group (mean 3.5526, SD 7.0637).

It was revealed that men consumed significantly [ $t$  (237) = 9.689,  $p < 0.001$ ] more beer, than did women (female mean 4.32, SD 5.4; male mean 11.28, SD 5.62) per drinking occasion. And women consumed significantly [ $t$  (233) = -4.071,  $p < 0.001$ ] more wine than did men (female 2.22, SD 3.10, male 0.7824 SD, 2.17) per drinking occasion. No difference in the volume of spirits was observed [ $t$  (237) = 0.833,  $p > 0.05$ ].

## Discussion and Conclusions

The present investigation failed to confirm the high abstinence rate, within Northern Ireland, of 30% (DHSS, 1999). The low abstinence rate, 8%, observed in the present investigation may represent a self-selection bias, in that individuals who do not drink did not take part. The methodology employed in the DHSS (1999) study comprised of an interview, thus facilitating the necessary recording of responses from non-drinkers. The present investigation revealed that weekend drinking is more popular than is weekday drinking. The Northern Ireland Drink Survey (1999) revealed a range of 13%–16% of respondents who consume alcohol on any weekday. The present investigation revealed a range of 15%–28% of the sample who reported drinking alcohol on any day during the week. In contrast to the Northern Ireland Drink Survey (1999), observation that 34% and 54% of respondents consume alcohol on a Friday and Saturday night, respectively, the present investigation revealed that 59% have a drink on a Friday night and 73.6% have a drink on a Saturday night. Thus, the results from the present investigation would suggest more frequent drinking. The present study is limited in the small response rate, and the lack of information on the characteristics of non-respondents. However it does support the previous evidence that was observed in the broader community. The DHSS survey of Northern Ireland (1999) revealed that 39% of drinkers binged (more than 10 units). In the current study 60% of the present sample consumed more than 10 units at any one sitting, thus confirming the high quantity in conjunction with the high frequency of alcohol

consumption of the present sample. The present investigation revealed that the public bar is the most popular place of alcohol consumption (45.8%); neither gender nor age of the participants influences the popularity of the public bar. The highest frequency and quantity of alcohol consumption was observed for respondent's who reported drinking beer. It was revealed that 67.4% of respondents drank beer, and of these respondents, 34.7% drank six or seven days a week. This is in contrast to a national 8% daily alcohol intake (DHSS, 1999). In conjunction with the prevalence of high frequency of beer consumption was the reported large quantity of beer consumed. The most frequently reported quantity of beer, 16 units per occasion, was twice that of the most frequently reported quantity of spirits and more than four times the most frequently reported quantity of wine. This result offers support to the findings that beer drinkers observed in a natural setting consumed about three times as much as spirit drinkers (Stockwell et al., 1992). The present study also supports the findings that males consume more beer than do females. The findings of the present investigation confirm the previously observed prevalence of binge drinking in Northern Ireland. This suggests that a high level of alcohol consumption at one sitting is the accepted and, possibly, the expected norm of drinking. The present research also indicates that individuals consume more than one type of beverage on any one drinking occasion. It was also observed that people consume alcohol in more than one place throughout an evening of alcohol consumption. That is, they may have a drink in a friend's house before going to a bar and later proceeding to a night-club. This variation in beverage choice and place of consumption has implications for research on the effects of alcohol on the social drinker. It is common in past research on the effects of alcohol on the social drinker to administer a standard drink, usually vodka in a laboratory setting.

Consequently the effects of alcohol consumption related to real life situations is not being addressed either in relation to quantity and type of beverage nor in relation to the drinking environment. The present study revealed that the public bar is the most popular place for alcohol consumption. This represents an environment laden with social meaning thus, making replication in a laboratory very difficult. These aspects of alcohol consumption by the social drinker are currently under investigation and the effects, specifically on cognitive function, will form the basis of future reports.

There is a tendency for binge drinking in Northern Ireland. It provides evidence that there is a tendency for individuals to mix drinks and also to drink in different venues on the same drinking occasions.

## THE AUTHORS

**Dr Adele McKinney.** Areas of interest are the next day effects of a normal night's drinking on mood and cognition, also interested in the impact of life events precipitating a first episode of psychosis.

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## Modèles de la Consommation d'alcool Parmi un Échantillon d'Irlandais du Nord

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la consommation d'alcool d'un échantillon d'irlandais du Nord pendant une période de 6 mois, en 1998. En outre, l'étude examine l'influence des variables contextuelles par rapport à la quantité et à la fréquence de consommation d'alcool. Des questionnaires ont été administrés à 600 participants, le taux de réponse était de 39.8% (239). On a observé un taux d'abstinence inattendu qui peut être dû à des réponses distordues. Les résultats ont indiqué une consommation d'alcool haute en fréquence (29.7% boient 4 jours ou plus par semaine) et en quantité (unités moyennes consommées par semaine 43.21, écart-type 40.33). Les buveurs de bière ont consommé la plus grande quantité d'alcool et ont également eu la fréquence de la consommation d'alcool la plus élevée. On a observé que 45.8% de la totalité de la consommation d'alcool a eu lieu dans un bar (établissement public) et que le choix de ce genre d'établissement pour consommer de l'alcool n'était ni influencé par l'âge ou le sexe. La recherche actuelle a indiqué que près de la moitié (45%) des individus interrogés ont tendance à consommer plus qu'une seule sorte de boisson à un endroit donné et qu'il y a une tendance à consommer de l'alcool dans plus d'un établissement lors d'une seule beuverie. Ces résultats indiquent qu'il existe un modèle de consommation d'alcool caractéristique à l'Irlande du Nord qui a des conséquences sur des études examinant les effets de l'alcool sur les individus buvant de l'alcool en société occasionnel.

## Patrones en el Consumo del Alcohol de Una Muestra de Irlanda del Norte

### RESUMEN

Est artículo examina los hábitos en el consumo de alcohol de una muestra norirlandesa durante un período de 6 meses en 1998. Además el estudio examina la influencia de variables contextuales en la cantidad y frecuencia del consumo de alcohol. Los cuestionarios se administraron a 600 participantes, la tasa de respuesta era de 39.8% (239). Se observó un inesperado bajo porcentaje en abstinencia. Sin embargo esto puede ser debido a una respuesta influenciada. Los resultados revelaron consumo de alcohol con una gran frecuencia (29.7% beben entre 4 o más días semanalmente) y en elevadas cantidades (43.1 unidades semanalmente, SD 40.33). Bedebotes de cerveza consumieron la mayor cantidad de alcohol así como con la mayor frecuencia. Se observó que 45.8% de los actos sociales incluyendo el consumo de alcohol se llevaron a cabo en establecimientos cuya fama no estaba determinada por el género o edad del público. La actual investigación revela que casi la mitad de los individuos (45%) consumen más de un tipo de bebida en el mismo lugar y existe una tendencia a consumir alcohol en más de un establecimiento durante una única sesión. Estos resultados indican un modelo característico dentro de Irlanda del Norte lo que conlleva implicaciones para los estudios que investigan los efectos del alcohol en la persona que bebe socialmente.